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# STUDY PROJECT

## LESSONS LEARNING -- THE ARMY SYSTEM

BY

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USAWC MILITARY STUDIES PROGRAM



LESSONS LEARNING - THE ARMY SYSTEM

AN INDIVIDUAL STUDY PROJECT  
Intended for Publication

by

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## ABSTRACT

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➤ The Army's lessons learning system is looked at from the user's perspective. Initially a historical review based on Dennis J. Vetock's book, *A History of U.S. Army Lessons Learning* is conducted. The salient points drawn from Vetock's work are presented. First, in each war beginning with WWI a lessons system was established, but always well into the war. Second, the lessons system in each war showed the basic doctrine to be sound, but the application of the doctrine was poor. Third, there has been a consistent role for professional journals to play. Fourth, each lessons system juxtaposed command battle reports with those of independent observers. The last of Vetock's points discussed is the formation of the Center for Army Lessons Learned (CALL). The recently published Army Regulation, AR 11-33, Army Lessons Learned Program, is also reviewed. Conclusions are drawn from the study. The system could be improved by soliciting increased use and giving instructions relative to that use. Not all potential contributors to the system are being sought out. Observer controllers from the Combat Training Centers (CTC), CTC exercising unit chains of command and key unit members upon their change of jobs are some examples. The lessons data base needs to be made more user friendly and more accessible. The last observation is that the lessons system could be made to assist in linking current unit solicitors of solutions with past contributors.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the lessons learning systems used by the U.S. Army (USA), from a user's perspective. During this process, I intend to look at the systems used in the past as well as the current one, to try and discover why so many users have a sense of frustration and ambivalence after working with it. Part of this frustration comes from the nature of war, which Martin VanCreveld in his book, *Command in War*, describes.

War brings to the fore some of the most powerful emotions known to man, including fear, anger, vindictiveness, and hatred. Consequently, and even disregarding the manifold ways in which the human mind distorts information in the very act of processing it, the quest for certainty cannot be expected to proceed rationally all or even most of the time.

Second, war consists of two independent wills confronting each other... With each side free and, presumably, willing to double-cross the other to the utmost of his ability, the progress of the struggle between them is largely unforeseeable.<sup>1</sup>

As true as this description may be, there is still room for additional explanation of the lesson user's difficulty. Dennis J. Vetock's book, *A History of U.S. Army Lessons Learning*, defines the subject by chronologically laying out the Army's (USA) lesson learning accomplishments from the Indian Wars in the 1700's to the present. It's a well written and interesting book, worth the professional attention of many. It lays out a good understanding for why the process works the way it does. A brief summery of his major points follows.

In the earliest times, battle reporting served largely as a situation update for the commander and an identification of which subordinates deserved praise or censure. Some things never change! It wasn't until the early 1900's when the newly formed service schools and professional

association:        in their semi-official journals began to discuss and transmit combat related ideas, frustrations, lessons and experiences.

WWI brought the birth of the first true lessons learning system. It was spawned in General Pershing's American Expeditionary Force (AEF) headquarters in France. The program was installed under the AEF staff officer for training, the G5. His immediate problem was to rapidly improve the combat effectiveness of units hastily mobilized and sent to France. Once this initial training and upgrading was completed the issue became to affect the basic training that soldiers and units were receiving prior to embarkation. This first system then concentrated on applying combat lessons to a newly raised Army.

WWII and its aftermath served to institutionalize and centralize the process. Army regulations (AR's) required command battle reports and their routing to Department of Army (DA) and service schools. These command reports, plus DA sponsored and provided observers of combat actions, combined to feed a DA level analysis group with the facts required to publish a variety of materials designed to crosslevel combat experience between units. Information was aimed at all levels from major headquarters to individual soldiers. DA did not use it to look at doctrine. The service schools had the task to fold lessons into doctrine and make the necessary changes. The significant developments here were the combination of DA supplied observers and command combat reporting, and the separation of DA and the service schools in regard to doctrine writing.

The Korean Conflict completed the centralization of the system at DA which held as it mainstays, commander after battle reporting and DA level directed observers. Special Regulation 525-85-5, *Processing of*

*Combat Information* was published, establishing the lessons learning system. Additionally, DA's lessons literature distribution process was set. *Training Bulletin* giving company level information and *Dissemination of Combat Information* containing verbatim extracts from battle reports with source and date indicated were the principal documents.

The Vietnam period brought an analytical approach to the process. Operations research and increased ties to the research and development community were its added contributions to the system. The implementation of Combat Developments Command (CDC) aligned all the elements of operational development to include formulation of current doctrine and the determination of future needs.<sup>2</sup>

Beyond the chronology, Vetock's book yields a number of observations about the Army's wartime needs that have in the past sparked the creation of lessons generating systems. The first of these is that in each war the system for developing and using experience lessons came into being significantly after the war had started. This appears true even though the significance of incorporating lessons became increasingly important with each successive war. Part of the explanation for this situation lies in the fact that in all wars prior to Vietnam the lessons system died completely after the war which gave birth to it ended. The lessons generated were preserved and fed into the doctrine and history development process, but no attempt to hold the system itself in place was made.

Second, in each war basic doctrine was judged to be sound. The lessons that were generated showed that application of doctrine; specific tactics, techniques and procedures; was the tough nut to crack. People



and units were simply not skilled practitioners in applying doctrine, at least not initially. Specific application of broad principles is never easy. An interesting aside is that there were few if any lessons developed or necessary at the strategic level.

A third point shows a consistent and important role for branch, professional journals. There is a significant volume of lessons generated when all levels of units are considered. Journals are one more available method to get the word out. Also there are few mediums available for widely dispersed unit practitioners to discuss and argue application ideas and problems. Again, the journals perform a useful and somewhat unique role, providing a forum for all levels to participate with non-attribution.

Fourthly, the process of juxtaposing command battle reports against impartial observer reports appears to have produced a more thorough and accurate chronicle of what really occurred and what of it was significant. There appears to have been value in generating lessons from both of these systems because the practice was maintained in all conflicts after WWII. I can see a value in the observer, who is not saddled with the task of fighting, being able to concentrate and research a single problem. There's also value, it seems to me, in a check and balance process being developed and maintained between those inside a chain of command and those with no responsibility for the action, but to observe.

Lastly, there is a family tie between lessons learning and history. Over time, historians played an increasing role in the development and use of combat lessons. History, as a permanent entity, has helped validate and given weight to efforts to maintain the lessons system. Historians like S.L.A. Marshal pioneered the technique of after action review which look a

great deal like today's AAR's.<sup>3</sup> A fundamental element of an AAR is the first step--determining what happened. The rest of the learning process occurs given that the participants know what actually transpired. Lessons learned and history share this common need to rely on factual and accurate records of what happened. Valid analysis can only be based on accurate and comprehensive facts. In this regard, the systems which produce lessons may also be the first step in the process of historical analysis.

In 1985 the Center for Army Lessons Learned (CALL) at Fort Leavenworth was created. It represents a start towards fixing the historical problem of the lessons system being dropped after the current war is over. CALL's first orientation was on the then newly created National Training Center (NTC) at Fort Irwin, California.<sup>4</sup> The NTC offered a very realistic combat environment for CALL to operate in, and it sent observers much as DA had done in past wars. The major difference between the NTC system and the ones used in combat is that no command assessment is used at the NTC. There the evaluation apparatus has two main components, the observer controllers who ride along with the unit in the field and the computer tracking and analysis center located in garrison. The unit commander is a receiver rather than a generator of lessons. CALL utilized observer controller reports, the formal after action assessments, exercise computer data, and after exercise unit surveys to generate a lessons learned bulletin and to establish a centralized computer data base (ALLS). The data base was established to collate lessons, generate trend analysis, and provide a reservoir of lessons to be accessible to the Army at large.<sup>5</sup> The system has the design

potential to correct many of the problems and frustrations that history and current practice show exist in the lessons using business.

In practice there are a number of problems that have grown up with the lessons system and that persist today. My own experiences with the current system go back to its beginnings. Before being assigned to an NTC rotation unit, I simply had an interest in what was going on, how did the NTC work. CALL's bulletins were the only available publications. In 1985, I took command of an Armor battalion that was scheduled for an NTC rotation. My interests in the NTC and any available lessons learned went up dramatically; what was it like, how do you do well, what are the rules, how best to prepare? In both the general and specific case the help I was able to get from CALL and its bulletins was marginal.

The largest obstacle was that the CALL bulletins were exclusively organized around NTC battle vignettes. There was little or no discussion of that battle or any other analysis. There was no comparison of this vignette with other battles in an NTC context or combat and no discussion of lessons relative to doctrine. Basically you were reading a comic book about the NTC, and it was good but only at a minimal level. For the most part you were left to draw whatever conclusions you wanted or were capable of.

A follow on obstacle came when we, in the battalion, tried to go back into previous issues of the bulletin and find specific examples for things we were trying to solve in the unit. The bulletins were largely random collections with no indexing system to allow zeroing in on a specific problem area. It was also not possible to find identification of units or individuals who had done well or poorly at a particular thing. You couldn't identify anyone to go talk to who actually did the learning. Part of this

problem has to do with unit personnel turbulence. Almost immediately after a NTC rotation unit key players leave the unit for new assignments. Another part of the issue is the desire for non-attribution, that is, letting people train and make mistakes without general public scrutiny. The overall effect is to curtail the learning potential of the system significantly.

It would have been very helpful to have had a CALL data base available that had been organized to facilitate an exchange with the company, battalion, brigade level of the Army. Currently the ALLAS (Army Lessons Learned Automated System) does not appear to be user friendly enough to encourage or promote use by this level. Its perceived focus is up, dedicated to trend analysis for use by the Army's senior leadership. I would have queried the system for information relative to a tank battalion organizing for the NTC. Other examples might have been, scout platoon tactics strengths and weaknesses, time management versus orders preparation, and SOP construction and use. In any event, CALL could have tracked, in a variety of ways, the identities of participants that are available and willing to discuss their experiences.

After the battalion, I was assigned to the newly formed Battle Command Training Program (BCTP), which was in the first stages of developing an evaluation process for an NTC-like exercise for divisions and corps. In spite of the fact that CALL had evaluated a number of division and corps exercises, and had been generating lessons for about five years, they were unable to provide any real assistance in developing the BCTP tools. They felt that CALL's role did not include the evaluation of materials collected. They simply gathered and forwarded raw data to the ALLS computer in California or to a service school department or

staff. No attempt was made to get an immediate level of culling or analysis from the generating organization. Observer controllers were never tasked at BCTP, nor at the NTC from my knowledge, to provide any level of distillation. Raw data, reports, computer tapes, etc., were gathered and shipped.

There are other doubts also that CALL, as currently organized, will be able to do the desired job. "As proposed, CALL seems seriously limited in its lesson-learning capabilities ... "6. Mr. Vetock goes on to register a number of fears that parallel my own experiences. Not all is gloom, however, we do for the first time have a facility and a group of dedicated soldiers developing and exercising a lessons learning system.

Another look at CALL and the lessons system can be made by reading the new Army Regulation, AR 11-33, Army Lessons Learned Program: System Development and Application, dated October, 1989. In it lessons and observations are defined.

Lessons learned. Validated knowledge and experience derived from observations and historical study of military training, exercises, and combat operations.

Combat relevant lessons learned. Conclusions derived from analysis of observations obtained from military operations and training exercises that are useful to commanders in preparing their units for combat by identifying successful doctrine, tactics, techniques, and procedures or problems thereto. These combat relevant lessons learned also assist proponent school commandants and the integrating center commanders in the validating or changing current doctrine, training, organization, materiel, and leadership development.

Observation. Raw information from any source which has not been refined through analysis. It can be either positive or negative. All input to the Army lessons learned system

(ALLS) is labeled an observation until formally analyzed by CALL.<sup>7</sup>

The regulation is quite small--ten pages--and not very definitive. The idea of validation and analysis of lessons materials is indicated in the definitions. In the policies statements and again in the procedures chapter, however, CALL will only receive observations and "provide for an analysis process to develop lessons and issues"<sup>8</sup>. Providing for rather than taking responsibility for analysis may be at the root of my frustration with the system. CALL simply farms out the analysis requirement to a variety of schools and centers. It is not responsible and neither is any one else. This problem becomes apparent when users try to query the lessons system and discover that it is impossible to find the office that did the work.

Another bothersome facet of the regulation, is the fact that a majority of the words are spent in defining who and how to input. CALL is designated responsible to disseminate lessons materials, but there are no procedures listed that indicate the systems availability to lower level units or to individuals. There is no information nor example of who can be serviced or the kinds of information available. Almost exclusively the users are defined as the upper echelons of the Army.

As I complete this quick review of the new regulation, I'm struck by how the flow of lessons information is almost completely directed towards US Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) and the service schools. A problem that may be related to this orientation is my sensing that doctrine changes or is rewritten too often. In the past ten years or so doctrine changed several times, in fact, often I wasn't sure what the doctrine was; the published regulation, the new coordinating

draft of the regulation, teaching materials from one of the service schools, or what my contemporaries were finding worked at the NTC. Now, only the first item in the preceding list fits the definition of doctrine but the fact is that the field army reacts to and treats as doctrine a number of the others. When the predisposition of the field is to accept that new versions of doctrinal manuals are published every few years and that those new manuals will contain significantly different words and concepts, then doctrine is not fixed. People will try to get as big a head start on incorporating the new doctrine as is possible and then the published doctrine does not equal the practiced doctrine.

While assigned at BCTP I encountered this changing doctrine situation in a startling way. We were attempting to create an evaluation system to use on the new division and corps BCTP exercises. In the process, our work was reviewed by BCTP's senior observer, a retired four star general; the Combined Arms Center (CAC) commander, an active three star; the Staff College (CGSC) commander, a two star; and a number of senior and experienced colonels from the college. Inevitably these reviews turned into discussions of what was or was not doctrine. Each person represented a different time and had a somewhat unique understanding of what the doctrinal term or concept was. The revelation, for me, was that current published doctrine was significantly different than any of the single views. I used the term practiced doctrine earlier and it applies here. It's often different than published doctrine and that too important to be ignored.

A related issue that came out of the BCTP experience was the lack of a doctrinal audit trail. As we researched questions posed by the senior observers it was discovered that there was no orderly or documented

progression from one doctrine version to the next. It was not possible to go into the doctrine writing bowels of Fort Leavenworth and discover what had happened to a given concept or term. Why had it been dropped or changed was not documented.

Although not discussed in AR 11-33, the Army is currently making some changes in how it treats doctrine. An attempt is being made to separate doctrine from tactics, techniques and procedures (TTP). Doctrine in the future will be found in Field Manuals (FM's) that are relatively small and present a constant and unchanging body of doctrinal thought. There will be a companion set of publications, Technical Circulars (TC's) which will deal with the application of doctrine in a variety of type units, levels and conditions. The TTP's will be much larger than the FM's and deal with the changes that progress, new equipment and organizations, represents. Historically, this is exactly where lessons have had their impact and where it can continue to have, if the system allows for adequate input and availability across all the levels of potential users.

Some things that remain to be seen are how the TC's come to be organized and what links develop between the process that produces the TC's and CALL's lessons developing mechanism. How to organize the TTP's is no small problem. There are many variations on the theme as just the different branches or types of unit are considered. There are also different levels within a command as well as locations, enemy, weather and others to consider. Whatever method of organization is chosen there will be an impact on CALL because the two systems are inextricably linked. Combat lessons have been about tactics, techniques and procedures throughout their history.

Hopefully, the new TC's will present more than just a single school



solution. What's needed is a cookbook of sorts, listings of proven options for dealing with different operational and organizational situations under a variety of conditions. Tips on how to do those things that help the training unit discover competency without so much trial and error. I can imagine a process where CALL's lessons are one of several inputs from the bottom and where published TTP's are outputs from the top. This procedure would be ideal from my point of view. It links and makes stronger two related systems and contributes to keeping doctrine stable by providing a subordinate mechanism to absorb and accommodate change.

In conclusion, I believe it is possible to improve the current CALL process by simply soliciting increased use of the system from the bottom half of the Army. The first step in accomplishing this would be to change the purpose statement in AR 11-33 to reflect that increased participation was desired. The only other change in the regulation that's needed is in Chapter 3, Procedures. Here instructions that clearly show what types of products are available are necessary. Additionally, explanations of how to put information into the lessons system and how to get it out are needed.

Currently a variety of potential contributors are not being incorporated into the lessons data base. Several examples come to mind. Observer controllers (OC) at all the Combat Training Centers (CTC) are currently left almost entirely out of the lessons generating loop. The OC's often work the very levels, company through brigade, that I find shortchanged in the current CALL system. They see unit after unit perform the basic combat tasks and operations. In a short time they are able to develop a valuable perspective on the kinds of techniques and procedures that work and those that do not. None of this perspective,

position by position and level by level, gets captured for counter part use.

The exercising unit chain of command is another largely unheard from group. Each MACOM is required by the regulation to collect and forward to CALL training after action reports. One problem with this process is that lower level unit and position comments tend to get edited out as the reports are reviewed up the chain of command. A possible solution for this may be to require key job holders; commanders, special and/or primary staff, operations center officers/NCO's, and others; to submit standardized lesson summaries after CTC rotations or at the end of a tour. These reports wouldn't have to be long or complicated but rather could be restricted, for example, to a persons top three lessons learned and not more than X pages in length. CALL could affect the input volume as required by establishing topic areas available for comment at different times.

The last of these examples involves projects, studies and programs that are done at all the service schools and centers. The Military History Institute's program of interviewing division and corps commanders as they leave command is just one example. There are many papers and projects that could enrich the CALL data base. The problem is time available to review, but what if the generating school were required to review the works, distill potential lessons and forward them. At least the system would be capturing some of these ideas and at no substantial increase in work to CALL.

As the lessons data base demonstrates its ability to accommodate a broader array of users, by responding to questions from platoon level and up, current expectations of the system will change rapidly. Intra unit competition and rivalry wouldn't be as big a factor. The feelings of

having to        in isolation and by trial and error would be modified. Relevant information and experienced people could be available to most units and multilevels of their leadership. The training unit questions are out there now as new people struggle to learn new jobs. An experiences based library that's both available and easy to use would be valuable to them all.

The last comment relative to soliciting increased use of the system has to do with finding ways to link information seekers with persons who have experienced the issue at hand. As discussed earlier, the current system does not provide the identify of units or individuals. There must be manageable procedures that would allow people to register their willingness to discuss their experiences. CALL could simply act as a go between giving two or three names of people who did an event that a question is being asked about.

Beyond soliciting increased use of CALL's system a useful expansion of the system would require a slight reorientation of the data base. I mentioned earlier the idea of an options based data base. This idea attempts to organize the data base more in line with requests generated by the platoon through brigade level of the Army. Generally, this level of personnel are struggling with "new guy in the job" difficulties. The information that is useful to this group is an array of options for doing the tasks at hand. Options, both good and bad, that can be chosen from to fit the unit and situation, but which come with the credibility of having been field tested by others. Sometimes simply being aware that an option exists is enough, but in others it is extremely beneficial to be able to discuss the action with someone who actually did the event before. In any case the CALL data base could improve its utility if it could be made to

respond in terms of ways, examples of how to do a thing.

If these options could be generated and individuals made available for discussing various techniques, the Reserve Components (RC) would be an incidental beneficiary of significant proportion. The RC does not currently benefit much from the lessons system, but would if they could receive responses to specific questions and concerns. Finding active component counterparts willing to discuss various problem areas would also be very useful. The RC suffers most from not having the time to do collective training at brigade and division level. Proficiency comes from practice and practice from repetition. Most RC units simply can't find the time to do the necessary individual and small unit training and complete a major field exercise three or four times a year<sup>9</sup>. It would be very useful to them to be able to tap into a lessons system such as I have described here.

The last improvement to the system that I'm going to discuss is CALL's lack of use of CTC observer controllers. At each CTC there are a number of OC's whose job it is to follow specific elements of a unit around the exercise battlefield watching and critiquing. In the process each OC becomes somewhat of an expert at his particular piece of the unit operation and of what it takes to do well or poorly at that job. Currently this expertise is not utilized in any direct way. For those that would be willing, OC experiences would be invaluable to people trying to learn those same jobs in units around the Army. The least difficult use that could be made of these OC's would be to get them involved in reviewing appropriate CALL Bulletin articles before they are published. This cross checking of lessons to be published would be good for everyone involved.

## Notes

1. Martin VanCreveld, Command in War introduction and conclusion, Course 3 selected readings, vol 3, pp. 350.
2. Dennis J Vetock, Lessons Learned, U.S. Army Military History Institute, 1988, pp. 116.
3. Ibid., pp. 67.
4. U.S. Department of the Army, Army Regulation 11-33, pp. 5.
5. Vetock, pp. 125.
6. Ibid
7. AR 11-33, pp. 10.
8. Ibid, pp. 3.
9. Binkin and Kaufmann, US Army Guard and Reserve: Rhetoric, Realities, Risks, pp. 98-99.